

Mass shootings are on the rise. According to a recent investigation by [Mother Jones](#)¹, there have been 102 mass shootings since 1980, and 79 of them have occurred in the past twenty years. All, or at least most, of us want to solve the problem of mass shootings, but discussions about what to do have become ineffective. In this essay, I am going to focus on how I believe our political representatives are discussing mass shootings.

In response to the Las Vegas shooting, President Trump said, “[i]t was an act of pure evil.”² At a vigil in the days following the Sandy Hook school shooting, President Obama remarked, “No single law — no set of laws can eliminate evil from the world, or prevent every senseless act of violence.”³ So, our current president, and his immediate predecessor, believe mass shootings to be evil. While this line of thought is understandable, I believe the way our representatives conceptualize evil is blocking their attempts to find workable solutions. I believe our representatives, when talking about a mass shooting, are conceptualizing evil as what English philosopher Mary Midgley called a “Beast Within.”

EVIL AS A BEAST WITHIN

That our political representatives conceptualize evil as a “Beast Within” is unsurprising when we track human thought development in the West. The concept of evil that is consistently relied upon is that of some unintelligible and uncontrollable force that consumes a person and makes them act irrationally. Labelling a mass shooter as *evil* is suggesting that when the shooter was engaged in the action of killing a bunch of people, the shooter was being

¹ <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/12/mass-shootings-mother-jones-full-data/>

² <https://www.denverpost.com/2017/10/02/trump-tweets-condolences-las-vegas-shooting-victims/>

³ <http://theweek.com/speedreads/755388/florida-gov-rick-scott-calls-parkland-school-shooting-pure-evil-says-nows-not-time-talk-gun-law>

controlled by a “Beast Within”. This conception has been inherited from the likes of Plato, Aristotle, and Kant.

Let us take a look, as though for the first time, at a theoretical Athenian living at the same time as Plato. Let us imagine this theoretical Athenian’s survival involved performing actions that motivated individual feelings of guilt and anger. Guilt about actions that caused pain to oneself and/or others, and anger at others for acting in ways that caused pain. Plato, when talking about human actions that he associated with guilt or shame, used language that removed personal attachment to those feelings, and attached the feelings to something “Other”. He commonly used animal terms to describe the source of those feelings. In Book 9 of the *Republic* he claimed

“these [unpleasant desires] bestir themselves in dreams, when the gentler part of the soul slumbers, and the control of Reason is withdrawn. Then the Wild Beast in us, full-fed with meat and drink, becomes rampant and shakes off sleep to go in quest of what will gratify its own instincts.”⁴

Let us imagine that Plato is making the following three claims:

- 1) “unpleasant desires”, such as can occur when we feel angry or guilty, only occur when we lose control of Reason.
- 2) if we deem a human action to be *reasonable*, we consider that normal behavior.
- 3) if we deem a human action to be *unreasonable*, we consider that abnormal behavior.

⁴ *Animals and the Problem of Evil*: 48

Where Plato conceptualized human reasoning as normal, Aristotle conceptualized human reasoning as good, or the method to attain the good. Aristotle “in the *Nichomachean Ethics* [1.7] asks what the true function of man is, in order to see what his happiness consists in, and concludes that function is the life of reason *because that life only is peculiar to man.*⁵ If the ability to reason is peculiar to humans, and the ability to reason is the good, then we should be unsurprised at Kant’s claim that “sexuality exposes man to the danger of equality with the beasts.”⁶ In other words, sexuality can interrupt our reasoning skill, and influence us to act like other animals, and acting like other animals is not good.

HOW WE ARE LED INTO THE GUN CONTROL DEBATE

To return to the contemporary example of mass shootings, both Trump and Obama are suggesting that the shooter was gripped by unreasonable forces beyond human control – a Beast. From this Beast conceptualization, our concept of evil leads to two equally promising hypotheses that contradict each other:

- 1) Less regulations on access to guns will prevent mass shootings. Since anyone can be taken over by an unpredictable irrational force, and, even with more regulation, anyone can still easily acquire a gun, then access to guns should be easy for everyone. The core idea, as Wayne Lapierre, CEO and an executive vice president for the NRA, famously put it, “The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun, is a good guy with a gun.”⁷

⁵ *Animals and the Problem of Evil*: 54

⁶ *Animals and the Problem of Evil*: 54

⁷ <https://www.npr.org/2012/12/21/167824766/nra-only-thing-that-stops-a-bad-guy-with-a-gun-is-a-good-guy-with-a-gun>

2) More gun regulation will prevent mass shootings. What those who hold this perspective focus on most is limiting the damage; they accept the fact that evil will rear its ugly head and inflict suffering in the way of human casualties, so the less misery it can cause, the better. Fewer guns means less misery. Senator Joseph Lieberman gave voice to this perspective when he said “the stronger our gun control laws are, the fewer acts of violence including mass violence that will happen in our society.”⁸

Such thinking is unproductive in preventing mass shootings, as empirical evidence shows that the amount of regulation does not itself seem to correlate with an ability to prevent or stop mass shootings: California and Connecticut have very strict gun legislation, yet mass shootings have occurred there; likewise, Texas and Florida have very lenient gun legislation, and mass shootings have occurred there too.⁹

Can we inspire a more productive conversation about mass shootings? Let us imagine, as philosopher Mary Midgley did, that “philosophy and plumbing are both activities that arise because elaborate cultures like ours have, beneath their surface, a fairly complex system which is usually unnoticed, but which sometimes goes wrong.”¹⁰ A plumbing system is composed of pipes, whereas a philosophical system is composed of concepts. When a malfunction occurs in either system, shit can rise to the surface. When shit rises to the surface in a plumbing system, although it may be messy and difficult to fix, we find a plumber to fix the problem. And as Midgley points out, “when the concepts we are living by work badly, they don’t usually drip

⁸ <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/top-12-quotes-gun-control-sandy-hook-shooting/story?id=17999175>

⁹ <http://lawcenter.giffords.org/scorecard/>

¹⁰ *Philosophical Plumbing*: 146

audibly through the ceiling or swamp the kitchen floor. They just quietly distort and obstruct our thinking.”¹¹ So, in the philosophy case, the shit is sometimes a little harder to notice and it’s a little less obvious who we should call for help. However, Midgley is correct that the two cases are analogous, and some kind of “fix” is needed in the philosophy case too. In the case of a philosophical plumbing problem, “we must somehow readjust our underlying concepts; we must [adjust] the set of assumptions that we were brought up with.”¹²

To return to the mass shooting problem, my suggestion is that to readjust our concept of evil, we need a different pipe than the Beast Within. Specifically, we need a pipe, or multiple pipes, to filter the flow of thought away from the gun control debate and toward the conditions that make it more likely that violent outbursts, which go against our more normal human instincts, will occur. Midgley suggested that, because our conceptualization of evil has been so strongly connected to how we talked about other animals, we can use research from the field of ethology to help filter our flow of thought away from a “Beast Within”. What if we used research from as many different fields of study as necessary to provide us a wider perspective of human behavior?

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¹¹ *Philosophical Plumbing*: 147

¹² *Philosophical Plumbing*: 147

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